CHRISTMAS TODAY

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the WORD made FLESH

Placid Jordan, O.S.B.

"And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us."

Triumphantly, the Christmas liturgy leads up to this passage of the Gospel of St. John. Throughout the year we hear it, at the end of every Mass, but now it stands before us in all its majesty and splendor, as the supreme message of salvation.

Christ is born! "Not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, but of God." as St. John tells us. The divine life became a reality in the God-man. "How shall this happen?" the Blessed Mother had asked. And the Angel Gabriel replied: "The divine spirit shall come upon Thee."

This is the meaning of Christmas. The Incarnation! The Word made flesh! God, the eternal Father in Heaven, the Creator of all things, assuming the nature of man, becoming flesh and blood, a reality, tangible and visible.

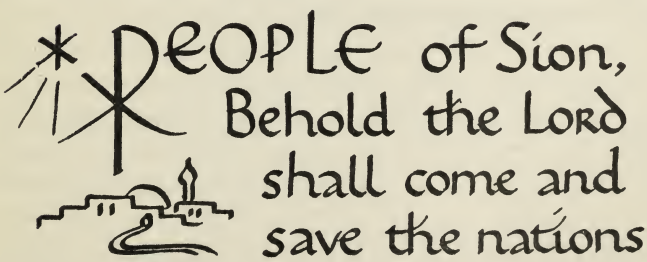
This is the meaning of Christmas, that in the darkness of this world the divine light is made manifest, if only we follow the heavenly star of Bethlehem; not any of the man-made stars which spread a superficial and artificial light, but the star of eternal life. Of this the Book of Wisdom says: "When all things are in quiet silence and the night is in the midst of her course, God's almighty word leaps down from heaven . . . into the midst of the land of destruction."

Always this world, all human life, truly is a "land of destruction." Always there is chaos when man is not related to the eternal orders of God. Our present day is indeed a vivid illustration of this truth, but all history of mankind reflects it. Unless the light of heaven pierces our darkness, we cannot hope to overcome it.

The inspiring liturgy we celebrate in the Midnight Mass is to make us understand that this light must be born in our souls . . . that spiritually Christ is to be born in us, as He was born in the flesh some two thousand years ago. Man would be helpless in this world, were he to face by himself the powers of darkness, the evil forces causing hate and strife, war and revolution. Peace—the true peace which the world cannot give—he can find only if he turns to Christ, if he kneels humbly at the manger of Bethlehem to perceive the light which is not of this world, to share the divine light revealing itself time and again in our hearts if we are prepared to receive it.

"On this day the great Light came down upon the earth," says a prayer of the third Christmas Mass. Christ was born into this world, to make evident this light, to reveal the supreme mystery of the Incarnation. *The Word of God was made flesh.* The light of God became a reality for us to grasp.

"The darkness understood it not," says St. John. Men who depend on their own, ephemeral light understood it not. But those who throw their anchors into eternity, who do not turn away from the true light, they understand it and "become children of God"—as *other Christs,* re-born to a new life in the spirit, a life in which the Prince of Peace will reign forever and ever.



Christmas at the ALTAR

Martin B. Hellriegel

"Brethren, I bring you good tidings of great joy that shall be to all the people, for this day is born to you a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord."

I

"*Adeste, fideles,*" come ye faithful, and—be there an unfaithful one here, let him also come—to Bethlehem, to the "house of bread," to the parish church, to find in this most holy night the blessed Christ lying in a "manger," . . . on the altar.

Sacred bells from the high tower are calling out into the silent night: "Hasten, ye faithful, ye redeemed members of the divine Head, come to Him and be enlightened, come, and find once more the Wellspring of life, of joy and of peace."

Hundreds of lights are already beaming in the "stable" —in God's holy house to magnify Him "who will make this most holy night shine forth with the brightness of the true Light" (collect); but to the joy also of every "shepherd" who in this blessed Christmas night will hasten to the altar, there to be bathed in the brightness of this holy Light

We enter and reverently sign ourselves with holy water, so that our faith and the power of this water may renew in us the first ray of this blessed Light that shone upon us when in holy baptism we were reborn "by the laver of regeneration and renovation of the Holy Ghost whom He poured forth upon us abundantly" (epistle, second Mass).

In the humility of Bethlehem's shepherds we bend our knee to the Lord before taking our places, stand with respect for Christ's priest as he enters, and listen attentively to the keynote of tonight's blessed solemnity: "The Lord said to me: Thou art my Son, today I have begotten Thee." The second person of the Holy Trinity, born as *God* of the Father from everlasting ages, born as *Man-God* of the Virgin-Mother in time, will in this most blessed night be born in men of good will. "*Kyrie, eleison!* Lord, have mercy!" "Come, Lord, and tarry not, take away the iniquity of Thy people."

"*Gloria in excelsis Deo!*" The glorious "Hymn of the Angels"! Anxiously have we been awaiting this jubilant song first chanted over Bethlehem's fields when the King of angels was born in David's city. Its meaning is more penetrating in this silent, holy night than on any other day of the Church's year. "Glory to God in the highest,

and peace to men of good will." Enlightened by the eternal God, the angels revealed to the world in but a few words the grand purpose of the Savior's coming: To give glory to God in heaven, and peace—new life and joy—to mankind on earth. With the angels of Bethlehem we praise Thee, we adore Thee, eternal Father, who hast sent to this earth Thy beloved Son, the Lamb who will take away our sins, the Lamb who will have mercy on us. We glorify Thee, Son of the Father, for Thou art the Splendor of the Father, Thou alone art holy, Thou alone art Lord, Thou alone, O Jesus Christ, art most high with the Holy Ghost in the glory of the Father.

"*Oremus.*" Let us pray, . . . grant, O Lord, that we who know the mystery of His light on *earth,* may enjoy also His glory in *heaven.* Amen! So be it.

Like the shepherds of old we hastened to adore Him, to thank Him and to ask Him for Love and Light *here* and in *eternity.* Now we await with holy impatience God's reply. He speaks! "The grace of God our Savior has appeared to all men, instructing us that denying ungodliness and worldly desires, we should live *soberly* (in our personal life), *justly* (in our social life), *godly* (in our worship life), looking for the blessed hope and the coming of the great God and our Savior, Jesus Christ" (epistle).

"Thanks be to God" for this hope-filled word. On God's word we can indeed rely, for with Him there is principality and mercy, He has made known His salvation, and has revealed His justice in the sight of the nations, alleluia.

With a holy expectancy we stand, sign forehead, lips and heart so that the Gospel of the Lord's holy birth, about to be announced, may illuminate our thoughts, sanctify

our words and give strength to our deeds. And now, what a message of hope and joy! "This day there is born *unto you* a Savior . . . Mary has brought forth her first-born Son . . . The Word was made flesh and dwells among us!" "O, let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad before the face of the Lord, because He comes." Yes, He comes to redeem us from all iniquity and to prepare for Himself an acceptable people, a pursuer of good works.

Credo! I believe with my whole heart . . . "in Jesus Christ, true God of the true God, who for us men and for our salvation descended from heaven, was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary and was made man." Increase, dear Lord, in this blessed night my faith, my love and gratefulness of the great Gift of this night.

II

Look! Bread and wine are now brought to the eucharistic "manger," the altar. *Our* gifts they are. Gifts of love, for on them we place our hearts, our affections, our desires and our hopes. Shepherds and Magi have begun an offertory procession, which has grown from generation to generation; a procession of generous men and women, boys and girls who seek Him and will find Him, who bring their gifts to Him and in these gifts . . . themselves. "Receive them, gracious Lord, and receive us also who in a spirit of humility and with a contrite heart now present ourselves to Thee. May the Virgin Mother Mary, St. Joseph and all the saints pray that our offering in this most

holy night may be to the praise and glory of Thy name, to our own benefit, and to that of all His Church. Amen."

"*Sursum corda.*" Now lift up your hearts, for great things are about to happen. Bread and wine will not refuse to "take Him in" as did the keeper of Bethlehem's inn. "We will go, go altogether," they say, "that Thou, holy Lord, mayest come in and make me (bread) Thy Body, and me (wine) Thy Blood to the glory of the Father and as living Food for men of good will." "*Habemus ad Dominum.*" We have lifted up our hearts to the Lord, for we know that "by the mystery of the Word-made-flesh the light of Thy glory will shine anew upon the eyes of our mind; so that while we acknowledge Him to be God *seen* by men, we may be drawn by Him to love of things *unseen*" (preface). "Holy, holy, holy art Thou, Lord! Hosanna to Thee who art about to come in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!"

In a few moments "a Light will shine upon us, a Child will be born to us, a Son will be given to us, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God." *Maranatha Jesu*, **come, Lord Jesus!**

Fervently we pray that the whole Catholic Church, on this side of the "Iron Curtain," and on the other, may enjoy true Christmas peace. We send to our beloved Father, Pope John XXIII, as well as to our Bishop sincerest Christmas greetings. We unite ourselves, in the first place, with our holy Mother Mary who on this Christmas day will look down with great, great joy, on the marvelous "multiplication" of the mystery of the first Christmas night, unite ourselves also with our brethren on earth and the saints in heaven, asking them that we may be de-

fended in all things by the help of their protection.

Silent night, holy night! The heavens open and eternity descends unto our time! "THIS IS MY BODY! THIS IS MY BLOOD!" Emmanuel! God is with us! "While all things were in quiet silence, and the night was in the midst of her course, Thy almighty Word, O Lord, came down from heaven, from Thy royal throne" (introit, Sunday after Christmas). We have found Him lying in the "manger" of the altar. Now this holy night glows with the brightness of the true Light! Alleluia! Truly, a sanctified day is shining upon us. Come, all ye nations, come and adore the Lord—a great Light has descended upon the earth, upon our altar.

No longer bread and wine, no, dear heavenly Father, it is the Body and Blood of Thy beloved Son we now offer to Thee, Gifts truly worthy of Thy majesty. Graciously accept them, as of old Thou didst accept the offerings of the innocent Abel, the obedient Abraham, the royal Melchisedech. Have them carried by Thy holy Angel to Thy heavenly altar before Thy divine Majesty, and grant that we who are about to approach this holy altar may be found worthy to receive Thy precious Christmas Gift: the most sacred Body and Blood of Thy beloved Son and, through Him, be filled with every heavenly blessing and grace.

Send Christmas peace also, O Lord, into Purgatory and grant to all, especially to our departed relatives, friends and benefactors, a place of refreshment, light and peace —heaven's peace, with Father, Son and Holy Ghost, with

Mary and Joseph, with the angels and saints, with the whole heavenly court.

What rejoicing must there be in heaven, not unlike the rejoicing of the multitudes of angels in that first blessed Christmas night, now that the priest, with the most holy Gifts in his hands, prays: "Through Him, and with Him and in Him is to Thee Father almighty in the unity of the Holy Ghost all honor and glory, for ever and ever." Adam's *immense* dishonor of the Lord God is repaired by the *infinite* honor given by the Incarnate Word "whose wonderful birth has overcome the old man (Adam)."

"Amen!" We sing with all the strength of our lips and heart. Amen, so be it! "*All* honor" we give to the Lord, our God; we—*through* Jesus Christ; we—*with* Jesus Christ; and we—*in* Jesus Christ, for ever and ever.

III

And now—"*O admirabile commercium,*" O wonderful exchange, now that we have given our best Gift to the Father, He invites us to His Christmas Table. "Come, my children, come and be my Christmas guests. See, what precious Food I have prepared for you: The Body and Blood of my beloved Son. Come, eat and drink!" We know that there is no more precious Gift. We also know that every other Christmas gift can have meaning and soul only if it is a symbol of the all-holy Gift of the Father who sent His Son into the world—not only once, in the first holy night of Bethlehem—but every time when a priest comes down from the altar carrying God's holy

Son, saying: "May the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ keep your soul unto life everlasting."

With humble hearts we approach the Father's Table, and taste and see that the Lord is sweet. O marvelous moment! The Savior is united to me, united to my brother and sister, and they to me and I to them. O most holy night! O wonderful union, communion! O sacred Banquet! O most holy love of the Father who sends us His Son, that we may not perish, but have life everlasting. *Natus est nobis Salvator mundi,* the Savior of the world is born in us, Alleluia!

"The Lord is with you." "Grant, we beseech Thee, O Lord, that we who rejoice in celebrating these mysteries of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, may, by a fitting conduct, become worthy to attain fellowship with Him." The solemnity is about to close. "*Ite, missa est.*" Go forth, the Mass is ended. The Savior of peace, and the peace of the Savior, is with you. Keep Him in your heart as Mary "kept all these things in her heart." Radiate this Christmas peace into the hearts of others, especially into those of your family.

The Christ-Mass is over. Having reached home join your family in a procession to your home-crib. How beautiful if each member would light a blessed candle before the crib with the petition that the Christmas Light, Christ, would burn, not only during Christmastide, but on every day of the New Year. After singing the hymn, "O come all ye faithful," proceed to the dining room for the Christmas breakfast, a large, lighted candle standing in the center of the table as symbol of the new-born Savior's presence in your home, and wish all your dear ones a

"Blessed Christmas." Of course, every grateful Catholic will strive to participate in the other two Christmas High-masses "at Dawn and in the Day."

Pope St. Leo's Christmas message given to his Roman flock, fifteen centuries ago, deserves to hold a place of honor in our hearts now renewed by the sublime and divine Christmas mysteries. "Remember, O Christian, thy dignity. Thou hast been made a partaker of the divine nature. Do not return to thy former baseness." Then Christmas this year will be, as it should be, a new, strong milestone on our way to eternity to Jesus Christ, our Light and Peace and our Joy.

Christmas in the HOME

Maria Augusta Trapp

My title should rather be, "Christmas in our Home," for I wish to treat the subject by writing about it in that way.

On the vigil of Christmas, in the morning, the Church sings. "This day you shall know that the Lord will come and save us"; and, Be ye lifted up, O eternal gates, the King of glory shall enter in"; and, "The glory of the Lord

shall be revealed and all flesh shall see the salvation of our God." These promises are to be fulfilled during Midnight Mass. In most Catholic countries the giving of gifts has been advanced to Christmas eve. Surely the reason is that grownups may devote themselves with a quiet mind, undisturbed by commotion, to the great mysteries of the Holy Night. And so Christmas eve is *the* hour for the children. When the little ones get up in the morning of the day before Christmas, they find the door of the living room locked. No one is allowed in, nor even to peek through the keyhole, for this would displease the Christ Child, who will come bringing the Christmas tree and all the gifts. Only mother and father may assist Him in this task.

Christmas eve is confession time. Once more we listen to the voice of St. John the Baptist, who admonishes us to prepare the way of the Lord and to do penance. When the holy Child is entrusted to our hearts at midnight, He will find them clean, and warm with love.

There is a certain hush all through the house. People are tip-toeing and whispering; at the same time there is an atmosphere of intense activity. Mother and father spend the day behind the closed doors "helping the Christ Child." In our house the large Christmas tree, always a beautiful, thick, balsam fir, takes a lot of time to decorate in "the old way." During the previous night the older children have wrapped up candies in tinfoil or in tissue paper and then tied red threads to them as well as to hundreds of cookies. These are hung on the tree first. Small apples and tangerines are also hung on the lower branches. Then

come various Christmas tree decorations made in our home studios—angels and stars, worked in silver or brass, which will glitter later with the shine of the candles. Next in line, dozens of packages of tinsel are emptied on twigs and branches. The last touch is silver chains spun spider-web fashion, criss-crossed from branch to branch. The final effect is like a fairy tale. Now the Christmas crib is placed right next to the tree—the crib in the cold, dark cave at which Mary and Joseph had arrived the night before, after evening prayer.

When, finally, everything in the "Christmas Room" is ready, the rest of the afternoon is devoted to tidying up the house. This done, we all dress in our feast day best. When it gets dusk outside, we meet in the chapel. (Before we had our chapel we used to meet in a big bedroom upstairs.) Besides the vigil light, the only light is the little flame of the Advent candle. We say the Rosary and we sing every one of our Advent hymns and at the end a song to the Blessed Mother. When we are about in the middle of this song, the ringing of a little silver bell can be clearly heard. The tinkling is almost drowned out by a suppressed sigh coming from the little ones. This is their hour. The bell announces that the Christ Child has come. We all go downstairs. The double door of the living room is wide open. A big Christmas tree stands there all ablaze with the light of many candles. Linen covered tables are heaped with beautifully wrapped packages—gifts put there by love. First the youngest in the family steps forward and recites the Nativity story according to St. Luke, then we sing, for the first time, "Silent Night." And then everyone wishes everyone else not a "merry," but a "blessed Christmas." After this

the mother leads each one to his place and, for the next hour, the room is filled with happy exclamations.

Supper follows and a little lingering in the Christmas Room. Then everybody lies down to catch a little sleep before Midnight Mass. Around eight o'clock the house is dark and silent.

The first one to rise is the father. When he is fully dressed in his heavy winter coat, he takes a lantern with burning candles and, standing alone in the hall, entones an old Christmas carol which is sung only once a year. We never sing it before, and we never repeat it afterwards.

As all through the house the bedroom doors open, one by one the family comes to join the father in the song. Everyone is ready to go and everyone carries his lantern. We go out into the ice and snow (because in Vermont as in Austria there's always a white Christmas) to the little village church for Midnight Mass.

Vermont is every bit as cold as Austria. And so we are always reminded of Christmas in our former home. There it was about a ten minute walk to the village church, which was surrounded by mountains. We used to linger a bit in front of the church, listening to the strains of "Silent Night" as it was played from the church steeple, and watching the many little sparks coming down the mountains, the people carrying their torches and lanterns. They looked like stars walking down the mountainside—a lovely picture.

Now, in our new home, *Cor Unum*, in Stowe, Vermont, since the church is three miles away, we don't walk it.

But once in a while it happens that the road leading up to our hill is icy. Then, on the way home from Midnight Mass, we leave the cars at the foot of the hill and walk up. This is a real treat. As we climb up the hill, the snow squeaking at every step, the stars seem to glitter much brighter than on any other night, and the cold, crisp, winter air seems to be saturated with that peace which is peculiar to the Christmas season ever since the first Christmas when the angel announced "peace on earth to men of good will."

At home another treat awaits us. Supper was early, so everyone is hungry by now for hot, boiled frankfurters served with dark rye bread. Then comes the famous Christmas punch served with *stollen*, special Christmas rolls.

The morning finds us in chapel again. After the "Angel Mass" at midnight, we return to the manger for the "Shepherds' Mass," which should be said at dawn, to be followed in broad daylight by a Solemn High Mass. The great mystery of the Incarnation cannot be contemplated sufficiently in just one Holy Mass. The threefold coming of Christ, for which we have been praying and waiting during the weeks of Advent, has to be celebrated in a threefold way. Even the little children get the sense of the immense importance and mystery of the day when they are summoned to church three times instead of once.

In the evening of Christmas Day, we gather in the Christmas Room, light the tree again, and sing Christmas carols to our hearts' content.

Christmas in the MARKET PLACE

Edward Malone, O.S.B.

Christ has never been a particularly welcome figure in the market place. When Paul preached Christ in the market place at Athens, men listened briefly and then told him that they would hear him another time. But Christ ought, perhaps, to be most at home in the market place, for He was the principal figure in the most tremendous commercial transaction that ever took place. "*O admirabile commercium*: *Creator generis humani, animatum corpus sumens, de virgine nasci dignatus est, et procedens homo sine semine, largitus est nobis suam deitatem*—O marvelous exchange: the Creator of the human race, assuming a human soul and body, deigned to be born of a virgin

becoming a man without a human father, He gave us in return His divinity."

Although Christ Himself was never a welcome figure in the market place, His birthday, Christmas, is most welcome there. Perhaps no other human event is celebrated with so much external display and fanfare, not even our great national holidays like Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July. The Fourth of July comes and goes with one noisy burst of enthusiasm and fireworks. We are made conscious that it is approaching only by the shabby little stands with their faded bunting which bootleg firecrackers outside the city limits. But the world prepares for Christmas months before it arrives. We are reminded of it first when the new shipments of toys and trinkets appear in the store windows, and when the merchants begin to string colored lights above their doorways. But it is a distorted and perverted preview of Christmas that we are given. One who had never heard of Christ would find it hard to know who was the central figure in all this preparation, if he confined his observations to the market place. He might very well conclude that Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer was the one whose birthday was really being celebrated. For Rudolph's image and likeness does actually appear on the streets.

Christmas in the market place in the twentieth century is a terrible travesty of the truth, and a tragic extension of a mistake that was made centuries ago. Speaking of Christ's first birthday, St. John wrote, "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men; and the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it." The darkness still prevails in the market place, but we have

understood enough to construct a shabby perversion of the truth. Christ is the light of the world, so we decorate our stores and apartment houses with a mad display of colored lights. Christ negotiated with us with a divine prodigality by giving us divinity in exchange for humanity, so we have come to look upon Christmas chiefly as a time when we get something. God is love, and His birth in time the supreme expression of love, so having neglected all the offices of charity for the last twelve months, we make up for our sloth by sending shoddy Christmas cards to all who sent us one last year, not because we really care about them but because—well, it's Christmas.

There is nothing particularly original about the merchant using Christ and His birthday as a grand occasion for selling his wares. Christ Himself would be welcome in the market place, if He would only endorse some brand of tooth paste or would allow Himself to be sponsored by some great corporation. But He will not do that. He refuses to allow the worship of God to become the occasion for business. When the merchants of His own day brought their money tables into the temple and sold victims for the sacrifices under the very shadow of the Holy of Holies, He cast them out and gave vent to the one display of violence He allowed Himself in all His thirty-three years on earth. He said, "My house is a house of prayer, and you have made it a den of thieves." He might with justice make a similar comment on what we have done with His birthday.

Christmas, with its Christmas trees, its colored lights and its bright tinsel is here to stay, and neither this article nor any other efforts are going to change that. But there

is no reason why Christ could not be put back into Christmas in the market place. It is not that the things we do to celebrate Christmas in public are unchristian; they have merely lost their Christian significance. Christmas trees, Santa Claus, the giving of gifts, caroling are all Christian in their origin. What we might do is make an effort to see that the Christian significance of these things is made known to the world. Merchants might somehow find the courage to put an image of Christ in their store windows, and surround Him with a few respectable angels who would be recognized as reasonable facsimiles of their eternal brothers in heaven. St. Nicholas might be represented as the saintly bishop he was, rather than a mere rosy-cheeked Eskimo, which he was not. The Christmas customs of other nations might be represented in our window displays and their Christian origin and significance explained. This would, perhaps, contribute to a better understanding of other nations, and be the beginning of this good will which is the price of peace.

More important than any external change in our manner of celebrating Christmas, however, is an internal change which it should express. More pernicious than the disfigurement of Christmas by pagan and secular window displays, is the disfigurement of the true meaning of Christmas. We even go so far as to misquote the angels who brought the glad tidings to the shepherds. The angels are made to sing, reluctantly I am sure, "Peace on earth, good will to men." What they really want to say is, "Peace on earth to men of good will."

The world wants nothing more than peace, and we live

in a world that rests uneasy for fear of losing it. But peace it cannot find unless it first finds in its heart that good will which is the price of peace. This must begin with a genuine good will in every individual toward his neighbor. If the employer and the employee do not achieve a genuine good will toward one another, there can never be any true industrial peace. If Christians do not achieve a genuine good will toward other Christians and non-Christians, there can never be any true religious peace. If nations do not seek and practice a genuine good will toward other nations, there can never be any international peace.

Perhaps it is true to say that it is precisely because Christ has been banished from the market place, that His voice cannot be heard in the council halls of the nations. In the last analysis the chief cause of most of the unrest in the world, the incentive to aggression, the tension among races, can be reduced to a lack of Christian charity in our commercial dealings. Instead of giving of our abundance, as Christ commanded, we seek to increase our surplus. Instead of sharing our successes with our unsuccessful neighbor, we seek to profit by his need. And the irony of it all is that we have become so rich that we can no longer spend our riches on ourselves, but must spend them on guns to protect our riches. Find a way of bringing Christ back to the market place, and you will find a solution to most of the problems that trouble our unhappy world.

Christ in Yultide CUSTOMS

Richard Cleary, O.S.B.

Holy Mother Church has established the various feasts of the Church cycle to teach her children the mystery of the Incarnation. And to emphasize various aspects of the ineffable sacrament of God made man, she has sanctioned and encouraged various customs among her children. The observance of these customs springs from the joy in the hearts of God's love. Joy is the first consequence of love. The realization of God's love brings joy; and joy must find expression.

What, then, is more natural for man than to celebrate the cause of all his joy in every way possible, by bringing into use those things which have always been indicative of life, of love, of joy, of festivity: color, lights, flowers, decorations, special delicacies in food, special garments, music, singing, etc.?

cause for celebration

"Through Thee, O Christ, joy has come into the whole world." This thought must underlie every Christian Christmas celebration. Yet the individuality and ingenuity of various Christian communities manifests itself in diverse expressions of joy over the birth of God in the flesh. Every nation and even every family has its own special way of observing Christmas. Nonetheless, many practices which began as particular and local observances have spread to other lands. Even in this way the Christmas feast has bound many peoples into one people. Our American Christmas customs are an accumulation from many lands and many cultures. Santa Claus came from Holland's St. Nicholas, while our Christmas tree came from Germany. England gave us the tradition of plum pudding and many of our favorite carols. Mexico is the homeland of the poinsettia, whereas Italy gave us the crib. France and Spain have contributed many of the beautiful works of art which have a Christmas theme. From Sweden we receive our gingerbread cakes, and from Austria the melody of "Silent Night." The Christ-candle is part of our Irish inheritance, while the many and various colored lights were adopted from ancient Rome.

All these customs celebrate Christ's birthday. They are supposed to direct us to Christ. And, like the star of Bethlehem, they will lead us to the Christ Child if we are wise enough to follow their meaning. We will let a few of the simplest and more familiar customs serve as patterns for the rest.

the crib

The most obvious of all our Christmas customs is the crib. The practice of portraying with statues the entire scene of the first Christmas was introduced by St. Francis of Assisi. St. Francis had a very tender devotion to the divine Infant and he desired a realistic reenactment of the birth of the Babe of Bethlehem. He erected for his townspeople a crib with statues, straw and live animals, so that on the feast all might gather at a "new Bethlehem" and celebrate the remembrance of the first holy night. Soon miniature replicas of St. Francis' "new Bethlehem" enhanced the homes of humble folk all over the world. For those whose Christmas decorations have their focal point in the manger, home is no longer the holiday inn in which there is no room for Christ. It is a "new Bethlehem" in which they and their family will find "Mary and Joseph and the Babe lying in the manger," and they, like the shepherds of old, will understand what has been told them concerning the Child. "There has been born to you today a Savior who is Christ the Lord."

gift-giving

The desire to give oneself and one's possession to the person loved is a natural consequence of love. On Christ-

mas almighty God gave us His most precious possession —the very image of His goodness—His own Son. He asks for our love in return. Following the example of their God, Christians, too, have exchanged gifts with their loved ones, and in true charity have given generously to their poorer brothers during the Christmas season. For when our poverty-stricken race was destitute of love, having been stripped by the devil, did not God give us all good things in His beloved Son?

Whereas here in America Santa Claus (whose name is derived from St. Nicholas, the holy bishop of Myra in Asia who is renowned for his gifts to the poor) brings the gifts for children on Christmas night, in most European countries it is the Child Jesus Himself who is believed to prepare the tree and distribute the gifts. There, before the presents are opened, the whole family must be together for the reading of the Christmas gospel, a prayer before the crib and the singing of a hymn.

carols

St. Augustine remarks: "Singing is characteristic of a lover." Song is a natural expression of joy. In her great joy over the birth of the Savior, the Christian soul spontaneously breaks into sing. The lover celebrates in song the object of his love. And the Christian sings of the cause of his joy. Thus originated the beautiful Christmas melodies, hymns and carols which are so much a part of this season.

the Christmas tree

Perhaps the most popular of our seasonal decorations is the Christmas tree, which far from being a pagan ornament, as so many people think, is as Christian as the crib itself. The Christmas tree has its origin in the medieval German mystery plays. These were plays of religious significance and were originally performed in church. One of the more popular plays was the "Paradise Play," in which the stories of the creation of man, the fall of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from Paradise were reenacted. The play closed with the consoling promise of the coming of the Savior. Thus this became a favorite pageant for Advent leading to the drama of Bethlehem.

A fir tree, on whose branches were hung apples, represented both "the tree of life" and "the tree of good and evil" and consequently, the garden of Paradise itself. When the play was performed in church, the "Paradise tree" was usually surrounded by lighted candles symbolizing Christ. In the course of time, abuses crept into the mystery plays, and their performances in the house of God was suppressed. For a while the "Paradise play" continued to be presented in the homes of the faithful, bringing with it the "Paradise tree." The lighted candles, symbolic of Christ, were also brought into the home. Around the fifteenth century, the "Paradise tree," already bearing apples, was decorated with small white wafers representing the Holy Eucharist; thus the tree which had borne the fruit of sin for Adam and Eve now bore the fruit of the saving remedy for sin. Later the lighted candles were placed on the tree itself, painted ornaments (usually round in shape), and the wafers were

developed into pieces of pastry cut in the shapes of stars, hearts, bells, angels, birds, etc. Thus our modern Christmas tree has evolved as a symbol of man's fall and his redemption by Christ. The darkness of sin, into which the world was cast by the tree of good and evil in Paradise, has been dispelled by Christ, the Light of the world, in redeeming us on the tree of Calvary.

holly

Of the various plants that are used in Christmas decorations the most familiar is the holly, which is hung at doors and windows and used in making Christmas wreaths. Its green leaves and red berries have become the universal symbol of this season, adorning greeting cards, gift boxes, tags and labels, and wrapping paper. To the early Christians of northern Europe this plant was a symbol of the burning thorn bush of Moses (which itself was symbolic of Mary whose virginity was preserved even with motherhood) and the flaming love for God filled Mary's heart. Later the holly berries came to represent drops of Christ's blood, the prickly leaves being a reminder that the divine Child was born to wear a crown of thorns.

wreathes

The practice of placing wreathed candles in the windows during the holiday season is a remnant of the days of English persecution of religion in Ireland. The Irish people, stalwart in their loyalty to the ancient faith, practiced their religion in secret. Priests were hunted out as traitors and could minister to the faithful gathered to-

gether in their homes only at night. Around Christmas time lighted candles would be placed in the windows as a sign to the priests that they would be welcome in that home. To the English officials, demanding to know the meaning of these lighted candles, the people replied that it was an Irish tradition that every Christmas eve our Lord again tests the charity of the world. The lighted candles were a sign to Mary and Joseph that they would find a welcome reception in the Irish home. The reply was true, although the questioners did not realize its full significance. Christ had indeed tried the charity of the Irish people by persecution and, in welcoming His priests, the people welcomed the divine Savior who would come into their midst at Mass. The Irish immigrants brought this, their symbol of Christmas, to the land to which they migrated.

the Christ-Candle

Another beautiful Christmas tradition is that of the Christ-candle. This is a large, white, blessed candle tied with a ribbon and placed in a candle-holder covered with a silken cloth. This age-old custom preaches its lesson with a simplicity and eloquence that every child can understand: the covered holder represents our Lady from whose womb has come the Savior of the world; the burning candle represents Christ, "the Light of the world." Some mystical writers have gone further to state that the pure white wax of the candles represents the sacred body of Christ while the flame represents his divinity, which was united to the body through the medium of the soul, signified by the wick.

merry Christmas

Our traditional greeting for this feast is also Christian. Originally the word "merry" did not mean "hilarious or gay" as it does today, but rather it meant "blessed or peaceful," expressive of spiritual joys rather than earthly pleasure. The word "Christmas" indicates that a day is usually designated by its most important function, and goes back to the times when all realized that the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass was the essential and primary part of the day's celebration. As we refer to Candlemas day or Michaelmas as the days on which candles are blessed at Mass or the Sacrifice is offered in honor of St. Michael, so we have Christmas (Christ's Mass) as the day on which the Mass of Christ is celebrated. When we wish our friends "Merry Christmas" we actually say: "May the Mass of Christ grant you peace."

When the meaning of our Christmas customs is unknown, a lighted tree, a stable with some statues, a piece of holly, a candle in the window are little more than meaningless; but when their significance is realized, they become magnificent symbols pointing to Christ. "Come," they say, "let us adore Him."

Emmanuel